

September Paceline

For some reason, I've been thinking back to a classic *Paceline* column that Howard Grabois wrote a few years ago about riding with ego vs. riding in a zen way. He explained the contrast well, and evoked a sense for riding in a "go with the flow," into the feel of your bike and the movement involved in peddling through space, vs. a kind of competitive, I'm riding to see who I can push to their limit, who can get up the hill first, who can get the KOM or QOM for this segment, angst-ridden approach to cycling.

That's pretty evocative, and it got a lot of people thinking about where they are on the mellow, zen of riding vs. competitive hammerhead spectrum. But as I think about my experiences of group riding with friends from the bike club, it doesn't seem like a very nuanced or complete spectrum of experience. I want to expand on that basic zen-ego dichotomy with a fuller range of modes of being on the bike, trying to capture some of what I like best about riding in its various modes.

One of the experiences I enjoy most about riding is in a different mode than ego vs. zen. It's riding with an eye to the good of the group. In this mode, the members of the group are paying attention to one another, letting each other know if someone is falling off the pace, subtly speeding up or slowing down, pushing the pace a little here or there, but noticing if some of the riders are falling back when they push it a little too hard. They're arranging themselves to maximize good drafts, peeling off predictably when they're done leading, working together so that everyone is taken care of. It's not about attacks or trying to drop people or falling off the front, but about seeing if the whole group can push a little harder, go a little faster, feel like they really expended themselves and had a good, fun ride that revolved around teamwork. I think this kind of work requires people to be fairly close in ability to one another, or it won't work right. It may also require a bit of experience with people riding together, and knowing what each other can do (and can't do). It also means that you have to shift your goals from "what can I do" to "what can we do" as a corporate entity, a group that's riding as an ensemble. Instilling that feeling of concern with the group over the individual is a very cool thing, and it makes everyone aware of one another and the sense of laboring together and achieving something together that is very special.

Here's another kind of riding experience: going out on a long day's ride with some friends who are stronger than I, and having them stick with me and pull me along at a pace I can maintain and enjoy. This has happened to me lots this year, in Utah, on the dry run of the WRR, at the Old Kentucky Home tour, and it makes me feel both humility and gratitude. My friends and mentors know who they are: they have on many occasions intentionally kept it mellow and kept me going through long miles. This experience helped me realize that I can and do play this role of mentor and protector too, with riders who are coming along but aren't quite as strong as I am. This isn't just a relationship about stronger riders deciding to spend a day (or a couple hours) riding "down" in order to help slower riders out, it's a relationship about care and nurture and helping another rider realize her potential and see how strong she really is.

I've been told, recognize that I am a competent, strong rider, and don't play my ability and strength down. Friends who are good riders tell me, "you're good at this, stronger than you think you are." This is a super empowering thing to be reminded of, and it evokes my best efforts, not some kind of puffed up overestimation of what I can do. Again, it also reminds me that I can and do play this role with others, reminding them that they're good at this craft they're learning, stronger and more adroit than they perhaps realize.

So what about competition, the experience of kicking it into high gear because you want to beat someone on a hill, or pass them, or be faster or better than someone who's close to you in ability? Is

that kind of mode bad or good? Some of us find this mode more agreeable or common or closer to the core of who we are than others, for sure. But I think it's pretty common, and the truth of the matter is, it's a motivator. I wouldn't dismiss or downplay competitiveness and its role in getting us to give riding our best effort: it's a real, human thing too, and it probably accounts for getting us to give our best effort to a climb or a ride (or lots of rides). I don't think there any reason to be judgmental or critical of competitiveness. It's part of our lives on the bike, and for some of us, it's a key part of our riding life. It helps us explore and push the envelope of just what we can do. It pushes us to achieve and excel, even though we're not doing formal racing or time trials. Riding with ego—riding to win, to beat others, to be first, to make a PR—is a valid, important part of riding too. Women are interested and motivated by this too, by the way: it may not fit comfortably with the feminine, nurturant selves we're told to project in the world, but we're on our bikes and riding fast because we also like to compete.

Another mode of riding that I have learned to appreciate more is the comfortable chatty ride. I do such rides fairly often, often treating them as "recovery" ride that are a break from rides where I've pushed myself pretty hard, perhaps in heat indexes in the high 90s. And I lead such rides with the Women's Ride, where I think one of the things we really enjoy is being able to talk with friends for a couple of hours in a relaxed way. This is a well-loved part of some of the most popular rides the club puts on (think Brookston bakery runs, Paul and Janet's C rides, the conversation that spins along on one of Kay's early morning rides from Klondike). For me, calling such rides "riding with zen" doesn't capture what's really special about a relaxed, conversational mode of riding, which has to do with companionship, catching up with friends, and having a good chat about a variety of topics. I have friends from the club who I'd probably never know or interact with except for the fact that we all love riding, and it's enriched me greatly to develop those friendships.

So that's probably enough Pat pensées for one session. Enjoy the end of summer and beginning of fall: we won't be out riding evenings too much longer as the sun works its way south and the days grow shorter, so the opportunities we have are even sweeter knowing that Winter is Coming.

~ Pat Boling